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## NATURE IN THE *AENEID*

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The *Aeneid* is a composite of an extremely complex character. It is an allegory, symbolizing universal truths; it is a drama, powerfully depicting the adventures of a great hero; it is a love story, revealing with marvelous insight the workings of the human heart; it is an epic, collecting into a harmonious whole the myths and legends connected with the beginnings of Rome; it is a national poem, celebrating the history, customs, religion, and philosophy of a mighty nation. With all these phases, there is blended an element that lends to the *Aeneid* an especial charm. It is a nature poem, revealing, no less surely than do the *Bucolics* and *Georgics*, the poet's love of nature, his accurate observation, and his sympathetic interpretation of her various phenomena.

The earliest explanation of nature was mythological. Wholly unintelligible in itself, its various phases were endowed by primitive man with personality; the sun, the sea, the wind, were powerful deities; mountains, streams, and trees were demigods, nymphs, and dryads. As a better understanding of natural laws rendered this interpretation impossible, nature came to be considered the medium of communication between gods and men. All violent and unusual phenomena were messages of divine warning or wrath or prophecy. To learn the will of the gods, priest and soothsayer explored nature, and from the secrets thus revealed foretold future events. In Virgil's time this attitude toward nature was in its turn disappearing in the light of increasing knowledge. The conflict between science and religion had begun.

With the decline of reverence toward the gods, the Romans lost interest in natural phenomena. The cities were the centers of activity, where all men of ability, learning, and culture congregated. The days of Cincinnatus were past, the occupations of the country being relegated to slaves and stewards of the estates. While the Romans were fond of singing the praises of rural life,

their ideal carried with it much of the artificiality of the city. It included beautiful country houses, gardens laid out with geometrical exactness, flower beds, fountains, and rows of planted trees. It was a refuge, where they might find repose and quiet after the strenuous life of the city, that they sought, rather than the pleasures to be derived from the contemplation of the beauties of country surroundings. In the literature of that time nature formed merely the setting for human interests. There was no intimate relation between man and nature. While Virgil's poetry partakes of this general characteristic, yet here we find the beginning of the more sympathetic interpretation which forms the keynote of modern nature poetry. In his descriptions there is evident a tenderness, a deeper feeling, a delicacy of touch, that bespeak the true lover of nature. His early life was spent in the country and his gentle, sensitive temperament was well calculated to render him appreciative of the beauties of nature and susceptible to their influence.

How largely Virgil's descriptions of nature are borrowed from Greek poetry is a disputed point. Homer was fortunate in having a clear field for the exercise of his genius, nature herself being the only source from which he could draw his material. With Greek culture and learning, Rome adopted Greek literature, and all early Latin poetry was founded upon Greek models. Many of the nature passages, as well as other phases of the *Aeneid*, inevitably show the influence of the literature and learning with which the poet was so thoroughly familiar. If poetry had already beautifully represented a scene such as he wished to paint, the material was freely and frankly employed. Just as freely he imitated himself; several passages of the *Aeneid* are borrowed from the *Georgics*, and in more than one instance lines are repeated almost *verbatim* in the same poem. Yet even in the similes and descriptions most strongly resembling Homer's, we find more than a translation. There is infused into the clear-cut definite model a deeper feeling, a tender interpretation, that is distinctly Virgil's own. The *Aeneid* was written at Naples, where the poet had ever before him the changing seas and skies that play so important a part in the poem. The natural sur-

roundings, the wonder and delight of modern travelers, must have been as full of beauty then as now. In the neighborhood of Naples are laid important scenes of the poem. Lake Avernus and Cumae are there; not far away Aetna keeps guard over the Sicilian shore; Capri, with its grottoes and rocky crags, must have been familiar ground to the poet. In fact, there is scarcely a nature description in the *Aeneid* for which material could not be found within easy reach of a villa on the Posillipo.

The fidelity with which Virgil paints his pictures stirs the heart of the modern nature lover, and he finds himself wondering that his mistress can have changed so little in two thousand years! If, as some say, they are studio pictures, their truth to nature is even more remarkable. Where in all literature can be found a better description of the lightning than this—"A fiery rent burst by the trembling thunder clap runs with a gleaming flash among the clouds" (viii, 391)?

If Virgil's waves rise mountain high and their spray sprinkles the stars, so do the waves of the modern poet, to say nothing of those of the twentieth-century voyager! The traveler who has sailed between Scylla and Charybdis, disappointed in the expectation of hearing, on the one hand, the pounding waves, while on the other he skirts the edge of the raging whirlpool, is inclined to quarrel with the poet who has led him to indulge in the anticipation of so thrilling an experience. But Virgil's account of the fabled monsters guarding the straits voiced the universally accepted idea of the time, and its inaccuracies, if any, should not be laid at his door. The Tiber of the *Aeneid* is an anachronism; but in a poem of the imagination it is quite within the poet's prerogative to substitute, for the unlovely stream of Aeneas' time, the beautiful river of Virgil's day. How delightfully does the goal of all their hopes and dreams welcome the weary voyagers—

Aurora is shining from high heaven in saffron robes and gilded car. The winds subside; every breath is hushed; the oars dip into a motionless sea; Aeneas from the sea beholds a mighty forest. Among the trees, the beautiful Tiber, with its tumultuous rapids and yellow sand, is rushing into the sea. Everywhere birds, inhabitants of bank and stream, are flying among the trees and delighting the air with their songs (vii, 26).

When the Trojans begin their voyage up the stream—

That the oars may meet no resistance, Tiber all through the long night calms his swelling flood, the hushed waters are so still that the surface lies smooth as placid pond or peaceful pool (viii, 86).

Here is indeed an intentional departure from nature, giving a charming touch of poetic fancy.

Among so much that is important and interesting, the nature element in the poem is often overlooked. Some of the more vivid descriptions stand out with a marvelous clearness—the roar of the tempest that drives the ships to Africa, the indescribable charm of the starry night on the shore, the crash of thundering Aetna, these have helped to make the *Aeneid* famous; but the innumerable brief passages, occurring everywhere throughout the poem,—as Tennyson says, “All the charm of all the Muses often flowering in a lonely word,”—do not so surely arrest the attention. Pages of description could not be more effective than some of the swift touches. False Simon hid, “skulking in the sedges of a swampy lake” (ii, 135). The Greek ships, under the protection of the gods, return to the fated city “through the friendly stillness of the silent moon” (ii, 255). The faithful helmsman, thrown into the sea by the baleful influence of the god of sleep, clings to the broken rudder “mid the boundless waste of raging billows” (vi, 355).

Many and varied as are the nature descriptions in the *Aeneid*, a picture is never introduced merely as an embellishment of the poem. That nature has a value in itself and is worthy of attention for its own sake is purely a modern notion. Each nature passage serves a definite purpose; many descriptions form an essential part of the narrative; and they are never so extended as to interrupt the thread of the story or draw the attention from the purpose in hand. No other phenomenon of nature plays so important a part in the action of the poem as does the sea. It appears in all phases. We can feel the fresh bracing wind and the damp of the salt spray in—“The ships plow with their brazen beaks the foaming brine” (i, 35), and “The wind fills our sails and we scud over the foaming sea” (iii, 268). Different is

this: "The sea is calm, the light-whispering breeze lures us to the deep" (iii, 69). But more often the sea assumes a hostile aspect. The most elaborate nature description in the *Aeneid* is the account of the storm in the first book. No translation of this or any other passage can do justice to the original, so exquisitely do sound and rhythm suit the thought. Perhaps a prose rendering better preserves the spirit of the text; lines not necessary to the nature pictures are omitted:

The tempests have fallen upon the sea; from the uttermost depths, they stir up the whole ocean; from east and south and southwest, with their incessant blasts, they roll huge billows to the shore; now are heard the shouts of the men, the creak of the rigging. Quickly from the eyes of the Trojans sky and daylight alike disappear in the clouds; black night broods over the deep. Thunder crashes from pole to pole, and the heavens flash with the incessant lightning. Suddenly the limbs of Aeneas are paralyzed with chilling fear. . . . As he speaks, a shrieking blast strikes the sail full in front and lifts the waves to the very stars; the oars are shattered, the prow swings round, and the boat rolls in the trough of the waves. Down crashes a towering mountain of water; some boats cling to the crest of the wave; beneath others, in the abyss below, appears a glimpse of land, the seething surf struggling with the sand (i, 84).

in comparison with this wonderful action and vivid description all other references to the stormy sea sink into insignificance.

Often the nature passages, not closely interwoven with the narrative, furnish the setting for human action, the scenery of the stage whereon the parts are played. In these passages there is noticeable a fine harmony between the natural surroundings and the state of mind of the actors. How skilfully is new misery added to the gloomy forebodings of Dido, in the loneliness of the dark night when "the lonely owl on the roof wails mournfully, and repeatedly utters its long drawn funereal notes" (iv, 463). As the wanderers pause at the threshold of Italy, the longed for land of promise—

The sun sinks; the mountains are shrouded in shadow . . . ; deep sleep like dew refreshes our weary limbs. . . . Now watchful Palinurus rises from his couch. He studies the wind, listening to the whispering breezes. He examines the stars as they glide through the silent heavens, Acturus, the rainy Hyades, the twin Bears, and Orion with his golden bands. Seeing that all foretell calm weather, he gives the clear signal from the stern. We

break camp and spread the wings of our sails for the departure. Now rosy dawn was putting to flight the stars, when far away appear the dim hills and low lying plains of Italy. "Italy"! Achates' glad shout rings forth; "Italy," responds the joyful chorus. . . . The hoped-for breezes freshen; the harbor opens wide as we approach. The Temple of Minerva crowns the hill. Sails are furled and the prows turned to the shore. The harbor is hollowed by the easterly wave; on each side are jutting cliffs, white with the salt spray; between these hides the harbor. The rocks extend projecting walls like arms, as the temple recedes from the shore (iii, 507).

How sympathetically nature echoes the delight of glad hearts! The heavens are full of promise; the winds waft the ships to the shore, the land extends its arms in welcome. But the psychological conditions and, with them, the aspects of nature change. The following night finds the sailors weary and spent by the encounter with Scylla and Charybdis. They have lost their way and drift helpless and discouraged to the shores of the Cyclops. Here, too, is a sheltered harbor but unknown dangers threaten:

Near by, Aetna thunders with appalling crashes. Now it hurls to the sky a black cloud, with whirling eddies of fire, and licks the very stars with its fiery tongue. Now it belches forth rocks, wrenched from the bowels of the mountain, and with a groan hurls into the air molten stones, and boils up from the uttermost depths. . . . As the giant buried beneath the mountain shifts his position all Sicily trembles and groans, and spreads a covering of smoke over the sky. In the dark shelter of the woods the Trojans endure the ominous sounds, but cannot see the cause. There are no gleaming stars, no sky bright with glittering radiance; clouds obscure the heavens; the profound night was keeping the moon in a dark storm cloud (iii, 571).

The gloomy night was prophetic of the terrors of the day. The haggard Greek appears with his dread tale of Polyphemus. The giant himself comes stumbling down in agony to bathe his wound, as the terrified mariners hurriedly push off their boats from the ill-omened shore.

While Virgil usually pictures nature in harmony with man, yet no artist understands better than he the value of contrast. Much more terrible is the mad frenzy of the suffering queen, since all the world is at peace:

It is night. Weary mortals everywhere are enjoying peaceful slumber, the woods and the restless waves are still, while the stars are gliding midway on their course; all the land is at rest; the herds, the gaily colored

birds that frequent the transparent lakes and brambly fields, are wrapped in slumber under the soothing influence of the silent night, all their cares forgotten, their troubled hearts at rest. Only unhappy Dido cannot close her eyes, or draw into her fevered veins the calm of the midnight serenity (iv, 522).

It is with consummate art that the despairing gloom of the death chamber is relieved by the radiance of the rainbow. "Iris comes gliding down through the sky with dew-bespangled saffron wings trailing a thousand varied colors in the sunlight" (iv, 700). Similarly the dread regions of the underworld, the dark abodes of death, are momentarily illuminated by a glimpse of the world of trees and birds. The souls crowding about the Styx are "many as the leaves that flutter and fall in the forests with the first frosts of autumn—many as the birds that, driven in flocks by the approach of winter, fly from the deep to the land in search of a warmer clime" (vi, 309).

Nearly half of all the nature passages of the *Aeneid* are introduced in simile. Almost every phase of human life, reflected in the mirror of nature, finds its counterpart in tree, bird, and beast, in wind, flood, and fire. Aeneas, unchanged by the entreaties of the unhappy queen, is like "an aged oak, strong and vigorous, rocked to and fro by the blasts of the Alpine wind; it creaks and groans, its leaves are strewn in heaps on the ground, yet it clings fast to the rocks; as high as its head towers in the air, so deep it sends its roots down into the earth" (vi, 441). The movements of Mnesteus' boat in the race, uncertain at first, then sweeping on to victory, are like the flight of a dove "suddenly startled in a cave where are her home and her dear nestlings, she flies about, flapping her wings in terror, then glides through the tranquil air and skims along her liquid way with motionless wings" (v, 213). At the gate of Priam's palace, Pyrrhus appears, bright in his gleaming armor, "as when a snake, stuffed with poisonous food and bright in his new shining skin, glides from the cold earth into the warm sunshine; he lifts high his breast and twists his gleaming coils; the three forked tongue quivers in his mouth" (ii, 471). The serpent seems to have a peculiar fascination for Virgil. No other beast is described so



often or with so much detail. By far the greater number of similes represent violent phases of nature. Virgil does not revel, as Homer might, in the scenes of carnage, rendered necessary by his purpose—“so great a task it was to found the Roman nation.” While the last books are replete with treachery and bloodshed, portrayed with all the harrowing details, it is with evident relief that he turns from the spectacle of men slaughtering each other to beasts in which such savagery is less repulsive, and to the fury of the elements where there is a touch of majesty and grandeur. With a furious rush, Turnus dashes through the intervening ranks, “as when, from the mountain top, a rock plunges headlong, torn off by the wind or washed down by the heavy rains or loosened by the lapse of ages, it crashes down the mountain side with a mighty impulse, bounding over the ground and rolling with it trees and herds and men” (xii, 684). After a pause in the strife, the battle between the Trojans and their besiegers is renewed. The ground is strewn over with darts. The shields and hollow helmets ring with the blows. The battle rages fiercely as when, “at the setting of the showery Kidstars, a fierce rain coming from the west lashes the earth, or as when a black storm cloud pours down hail into the sea while dread Jupiter with the southern blasts whirls the watery tempest and rends asunder the clouds enveloping the sky” (ix, 668).

But the poet finds the fittest representations of fierce warriors in bloodthirsty beasts. Euryalus slaughters his sleeping foes. “Like a lion raging through the crowded fold, mad with hunger, he mangles and drags along the helpless panic-stricken cattle, his jaws dripping with gore” (ix, 339). Turnus rages furiously about the walls, seeking a way of entrance, as when “a wolf, skulking near the crowded fold, howls outside the walls on a dark stormy night; the lambs, though safe under their mothers, bleat loudly in terror; the wolf, mad with fury, rages at the prey beyond reach; he is tormented with long-continued fasting; his jaws are dry and parched” (ix, 59).

Even in the midst of such cruelty and bloodshed, the gentle poet introduces circumstances that render the picture less painful. Fierce lion and skulking wolf are not actuated merely by the

desire of killing; they are obeying the first law of existence—self-preservation. We see the touch of tenderness that is so strong a characteristic of Virgil's temperament in the lambs pressing closely to their mothers as the wolves howl outside the fold. When a wolf snatches a lamb from the fold it is the mother that is uppermost in Virgil's mind. "She bleats long and piteously" (ix, 565). The same note is struck again, "when ravening wolves are driven forth on a dark night by the blind frenzy of gnawing hunger, they remember their famishing cubs left behind and eagerly awaiting their return" (ii, 355). As Virgil brings the mother love into his fiercest pictures of savage beasts, so in the midst of bloodshed and carnage he shows the devoted love of Nisus and Euryalus; and, when the noble youth falls, "the blood flows over his beautiful limbs, and his drooping neck falls on his shoulders, as when a purple flower, severed by the plow, withers and dies, or poppies, weighed down by the rain, droop their heads upon their slender necks" (ix, 433). Aeneas himself pauses mid the din of war, and, with the tenderness of a mother, bewails the sad fate of the hapless boy Pallas, while the lifeless body rests on the rustic bier, "as a flower, plucked by maiden's fingers, a sweet violet or a drooping hyacinth, retains its bright color and graceful form though severed from the parent earth that nourished it" (xi, 68). Thus does Virgil relieve the darkest pages of his poem with devoted love and the dainty beauty of simile.

Nature often serves as the medium of communication between gods and men. The white horses feeding in the meadow (iii, 537), the sow with her snowy litter (viii, 82), are omens of divine portent. Anchises, reluctant to leave the burning city, is at last convinced by the omen: "There is a sudden crash on the left, and from the sky a star falls and rushes through the darkness with a brilliant glare like a torch. It passes over the top of the house and we see it disappear in the forests of Ida, showing the way. Then glows the long trail of light, and all the places round about are filled with sulphurous smoke" (ii, 692). When Aeneas, misinterpreting the omens, built his city in Crete, "suddenly there came upon us a blighting pestilence, emanating from

the tainted sky, the death-dealing season, bringing pitiful blight upon the crops, and overwhelming the people with sickness and death. Sirius parched the barren fields, the leaves and grass were scorched and brown, the withering grain fruitless" (iii, 137).

We cannot but note throughout the poem that with a few exceptions violent destructive phases of nature mirror in similes the passion of man, or are called forth by the interference of the gods. Tempests on land and sea are sent at the behest of Juno. Scylla and Charybdis are greedy monsters whose delight it is to destroy unwary mariners. Aetna breathes forth the penal fires of a suffering giant. The most forbidding scenes are haunts of the gods. The entrance to Pluto's realm is "a deep cave, with wide-yawning mouth, rough with rocks, protected by a black pool and overhanging trees. Over this no bird could safely wing its way, such fumes, breathed forth from the black throat, rose skyward" (vi, 237). The refuge of fury is a spot "shut in by forests dark with dense foliage, in the midst a broken torrent roars among the rocks and winding chasm" (vii, 565). The retreat of Cacus, the son of Vulcan, is drawn with a vigor worthy the pencil of Doré. "The towering crag with overhanging rocks, huge piles of boulders strewn here and there, deserted stands the mountain abode, the fallen rocks have left behind them a mighty trail of ruin" (viii, 190).

As nature is disassociated with the idea of Deity, she assumes a more friendly aspect: "Evander is aroused by the kindly light, and the morning songs of birds on the roof" (viii, 455). Night brings rest and sleep to weary mortals: "The heavens revolve, from the ocean hastens the night, enfolding with its mighty gloom earth and heaven and the wiles of the Greeks; the Trojans throughout the city are at rest, their weary limbs in the embrace of sleep" (ii, 250). Very beautiful is the description of the harbor that welcomes the storm-racked ships to Africa:

A deep bay, an island forms a harbor by the projection of its sides; it breaks the billows as they roll in from the sea and sends the rippling water on into the hollows of the shore. On either side are high cliffs, and twin crags tower to the sky; at their base far and wide the water lies calm and

tranquil. Above is a background of waving woods, a dark, overhanging forest with bristling shade. Underneath the jutting cliff that faces the sea is a retired cove, with fresh water and seats of living rock (i, 159).

How alluring, after the fury of the tempest, is the calm of peaceful haven, and how in harmony with the relief and relaxation of weary sailors, are the shady woods, and the cool quiet of the cave with its trickling spring. Could nature show a more friendly aspect than is afforded by this beautiful glimpse of the moonlit sea: "The night breezes blow. The fair moon shows the way; her rippling light gilds the sea" (vii, 8). The poet lingers with delight over the bower of the sleeping Ascanius, "where the soft Amaracus enfolds him with its flowers and sheds about him its fragrant shade" (i, 693). It is on such scenes as these that the poet loves best to dwell. We find here the delicacy of touch and the grace, that are such marked characteristics of Virgil's poetry.

There may be detected in the nature passages a faint echo of that minor key which is so evident in other phases of the poem, the strain that led Tennyson to say—"Thou majestic in thy sadness at the doubtful doom of human kind" ("To Virgil").

There is a tinge of melancholy in "Aurora sheds her genial light on suffering mortals, bringing back again trials and toil" (xi, 182), and an element of sadness in "Night hovers over us with dark overshadowing wings" (ii, 360). As the Retulians gazed upon Aeneas, the radiance of his golden armor was like the glare "when, on a clear night, the comet glows with a gloomy red; or the blaze of the Dog Star, foreboding drought, with sickness and death, saddens the heavens with its ominous light" (x, 272).

While there are many beautiful effects of light and shade, the element of color rarely appears in Virgil's nature pictures. No natural phenomenon is more gorgeous than the dawn, but, of the many references to Aurora, only four include color. It is not surprising that trees and grass are seldom described as green, since the prevailing verdure of the region in which the poem is laid is dull in tone; but it is not so easy to understand why, with the delicious blue of the Mediterranean ever before him, the

poet should not more often refer to the sea as blue. The most vivid coloring is seen in the serpent that glides peacefully about the tomb of Anchises: "Its back is flecked with dark green, its scales glow with a golden sheen, and, like a rainbow, send forth in the sunshine a thousand changing hues" (v, 84).

There are in the *Aeneid* traces of the early mythological view of nature. Iris, gliding down from the sky, is partially identified with the rainbow. Rugged Atlas is a huge giant, balancing the heavens on his head, while "dark clouds ever veil his pine-crowned head. He is buffeted by wind and rain. His shoulders are covered with a mantle of snow. Rivers flow from his hoary chin and his unkempt beard is stiff with ice" (iv, 246). More often we find the interpretation that makes Nature a tool in the hands of the gods. There is also clearly evident the beginning of the feeling that in Nature there is a friendliness and sympathy toward human life. We may detect the faint prophecy of this in the dream tree of the underworld with aged arms outspread (vi, 283). It is hinted at in the water and woods that stand marveling at the unaccustomed sight as the Trojan barks glide by up the winding river (viii, 90). But perhaps the nearest approach to this interpretation is in the simile that compares the fall of Troy with the fall of a lofty ash on the mountain top; hacked by the repeated blows of the woodman's ax, "ever it threatens and shakes, and nods its quivering leafy head. Gradually overcome by its wounds, it has given a death groan, and has fallen crashing on the mountain side" (ii, 626). While there are distinguishable here faint traces of the feeling that Nature has a semi-conscious entity, it is left to modern poets to find in Nature a sympathetic companionship like that of a loved friend. Yet it is not surprising that strange myths and legends clustered about the memory of Virgil, and that the *Aeneid*, during the Middle Ages, was regarded with an almost sacred awe; for the gentle poet of olden times seems to have been endowed with an insight into the secrets of the universe that was far in advance of his time.